The Derivation Of The Word "Witch"

Doreen Valiente

Strangely enough, the derivation of the word witch is a subject on which scarcely any two authorities can be found to agree. The most frequent explanation is that it is akin to the word wise, and that witchcraft therefore means The Craft of the Wise.

It is widely believed that Gerald Gardner originated this derivation. However, this is incorrect, as it appears in Hugh Ross Williamson's book, The Arrow and the Sword, first published in 1947, before any of Gerald Gardner's books on witchcraft. But is this the right derivation?

Not according to Professor Jeffrey Russell, who gives an appendix on this subject in his book A History of Witchcraft (Thames & Hudson, London, 1980). Professor Russell rejects any connection with the Old English word witan, meaning to know, as he also does with the Old English wican, to bend. In his opinion, the real origin comes from the Indo-European word weik, which has a general connection with religion and magic. From this very ancient root-word came in turn, among other things, a word wikk, meaning magic and sorcery, and this eventually produced the Old English wicca, a male witch, wicce, a female witch, and the verb wiccian, to bewitch or work witchcraft.

It will be seen from the above that "Wicca" does not mean "witchcraft" and never did, in spite of its widespread modern use. So how did this usage originate? In his biography, Gerald Gardner: Witch, it describes his initiation in "Old Dorothy's" house, and says, 'It was half way through when the word Wica was first mentioned: "and I then knew that that which I had thought burnt out hundreds of years ago still survived.'" It will be seen that at this time Gerald didn't even know how to spell the word. Its correct spelling is as above. Nor, unfortunately, does this account state in what context the word was used. It might have been that Old Dorothy's coven was simply proclaiming Gerald a male witch, in which case this would have been an accurate use of the word.

So where did Gerald get the idea that "Wicca" meant witchcraft? I would like to advance a theory of my own. I must emphasize that this is just a theory, and I may be wrong. But I believe that this idea originated from his reading of a book which I know that he possessed, namely An Encyclopedia of Occultism by Lewis Spence. This very valuable work of reference first appeared in 1920, according to the mention of it in the bibliography at the end of Gerald's book, Witchcraft Today. It has recently been re-issued by Bracken Books under the title of The Encyclopedia of the

Occult. The entry referring to witchcraft begins: "Witchcraft: (from Saxon Wicca, a contraction of witega, a prophet or sorcerer)." This could have been read and misunderstood to mean that "Wicca" meant witchcraft, and this misconception has been carried on through the ranks of modern witches ever since.

It has to be said, of course, that the word Wicca has its uses to define the present-day revival, especially in the USA, where a number of associations using this word have gained legal recognition as religious bodies. Personally, however, I prefer the term The Old Religion, which is the English equivalent of the Italian term used by the followers of Aradia, namely La Vecchia Religione. (See Charles Godfrey Leland's book, Aradia: or the Gospel of the Witches, first published in 1899.)

(Incidentally, there is a legend in witchcraft circles to the effect that the reason why the original edition of this book is so rare is that old Gerald bought up all the copies he could find and destroyed them. Whether there is any truth in this or not, I cannot say.)

In spite of Professor Russell's opinion, as quoted above, there is an older derivation of the word witch that may perhaps be worthy of consideration. This may be found in A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language by the Rev. Walter W Skeat (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1901). This book discusses the above-mentioned derivations from wicca, wicce, etc., and then in turn connects these old words with the Norwegian vikja, which means firstly 'to turn aside' and secondly 'to conjure away'. Thus, speculates the Rev. Skeat, the word witch possibly meant 'averter'.

He also mentions that the Anglo-Saxon word witega, a prophet or seer, comes from the Anglo-Saxon witan, to observe, which he says is 'cognate with witan, to know.'. We have seen that Lewis Spence regarded witega as the origin of wicca. So who is right? In spite of all claims, it seems to me that it remains a matter of opinion. One thing we do know is that the word came to Britain with the Saxons, who at the time of their arrival on these shores were pagans. I believe that to them, the word witch (or whichever of its forerunners they used), did not necessarily have any derogatory meaning. A witch was a seer, a knower, an averter of evil. The word only took on a negative meaning with the coming of Christianity, which taught that all the gods of the heathen were devils. So anyone who clung o the

old ways and the Old Religion was a devil worshipper. And annually, around Halloween, we still see the same old charges being made in the same old spirit of bigotry. Isn't it sad that these good folk haven't learnt anything since the Dark Ages?

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